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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000024

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: AOUN SAYS MY WAY OR THE HIGHWAY

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a January 4 meeting with Ambassador, Michel Aoun said the Hizballah-led March 8-Aoun opposition would not agree to ending the presidential vacuum until the pro-government March 14 bloc agrees to a package deal comprised of a one-third blocking minority in cabinet for the opposition, agreement on allocation of key ministries and agreement on all major Lebanese political issues. The demands for a package deal were meant to protect Michel Sleiman from potential attacks by March 14, argued Aoun. He also attempted to distance himself and his party from Hizballah and said French negotiations with Syria failed because France believes that Syria controls everything in Lebanon. Aoun (who was speaking before the Arab League foreign ministers met in Cairo) also indicated the March 8-Aoun forces would soon launch street demonstrations to push for an end to the impasse. End Summary.

MARCH 8 WILL ACT SOON

2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Poloff, met with Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun and his advisor (and son-in-law) Gebran Bassil at Aoun's residence in Rabieh on January 4. The Ambassador asked Aoun if there was any truth to recent rumors that the opposition would launch protests in the coming days to force an end to the political impasse. Aoun seemed to confirm this, saying, "Yes, we will take measures in the coming days; maybe active measures or maybe passive measures." Quizzed by the Ambassador, Aoun defined active as "demonstrations" and passive as "boycotts" or "civil disobedience." However, he noted that he had not yet met with his opposition partners from March 8 to decide on what type of action to take. (Note: this meeting took place before the possible agreement announced at the Arab League meeting in Cairo on 1/5, which may spur the opposition to delay any planned demonstrations until details of that agreement are known. End note).

3. (C) The Ambassador inquired about specific demonstrations against the U.S. Embassy by opposition supporters. Aoun gave his assurance that there would be no action taken against the Embassy by the opposition. (Note: Aoun's assurance contradicts a number of reports given to Embaffs by March 14 sources and GOL security sector officials. End Note.) He

later joked, "If we take to the streets, it will be better to go to the Grand Serail." Aoun added that such rumors were being spread by the March 14 majority and that his attitude had not changed, in that he believed embassies should be respected and protected. (Comment: If true, this would be a 180 degree change from Aoun's actions in 1989 when, as head of an interim government, he sent his supporters to overrun the U.S. Embassy, forcing embassy officials to shut down operations in Beirut and move to Cyprus for an eight month period. End Comment)

PACKAGE DEAL MUST BE AGREED
TO BEFORE PRESIDENT IS ELECTED

14. (C) The Ambassador stressed to Aoun the importance of electing a president now. He said that opposition demands for cabinet share and allocation of GOL ministries should be addressed after the presidential vacuum is filled. Aoun replied that March 8 would be unable to negotiate with March 14 after presidential elections occurred because in his view March 14 "could not be trusted." There were a number of political issues that had to be resolved before amending the constitution to allow General Michel Sleiman, Lebanese Armed Forces Commander, to become president.

15. (C) According to Aoun, familiar issues such as the adoption of an electoral law based on the "qada" (small district) system and the return of displaced Christian refugees to their pre-civil war ancestral homes, had to be resolved before a president could be elected. However, Aoun added a new issue; the resettlement of former South Lebanese Army (SLA) members and their families from Israel. (Note: The SLA was a pro-Israeli, Lebanese militia that operated in

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south Lebanon during the Israeli occupation. After the withdrawal of Israeli forces from South Lebanon in 2000, a number of these fighters and their families fled to Israel to avoid persecution by Hizballah and the GOL. Our contacts estimate that there are around 2,000 SLA members and their families living in Israel, most of whom reportedly received Israeli nationality. End Note.) Aoun argued that the SLA members living in Israel should be repatriated to Lebanon and fair trials held for suspected war criminals. Aoun stressed these issues, in conjunction with a blocking third and distribution of ministries, must be agreed to before amending the constitution to allow for Sleiman's election.

BLOCKING PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS
IS MARCH 8'S ONLY CARD

16. (C) The Ambassador asked Aoun if he was hopeful the impasse would be resolved before the next parliamentary session date, scheduled for January 12. Aoun said if the situation continues the way it has, nothing will happen on January 12, adding that maybe March 14 will change its position. The Ambassador noted that it could take months before such a package deal is agreed to and that March 14 had already compromised a number of its core principles

17. (C) The Ambassador highlighted the fact that, by leaving the presidency vacant and with parliament deadlocked, the Prime Minister's position and the Siniora cabinet, which the opposition detests, is now the only institution that the international community can recognize and work with in Lebanon. Wouldn't it be better to use presidential elections now to put the Siniora cabinet in caretaker status, with the international community then focused on strengthening the president? Aoun said he wanted the international community to put pressure on the Siniora cabinet to accept the opposition's legitimate demands, saying that halting the election of a president was the only card the opposition had to play.

¶8. (C) The Ambassador pointed out to Aoun that even with a cabinet majority, March 14 would be unable to force through legislation, pointing out that Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri would still control parliament, and that Sleiman held strong views against granting March 14 the two-thirds majority of cabinet seats it wants. What, then, are the March 8-Aoun forces giving up by allowing presidential elections to take place now? Aoun agreed that this was true, but believed March 14 would somehow convince Sleiman to side with its cabinet ministers, therefore leaving the opposition out of the governing process. Hence, they need the blocking third.

PROTECTING SLEIMAN

¶9. (C) Why do you have so little faith in Sleiman, a man who many view as being similar to Aoun and who agrees with the opposition on a number of key political issues, the Ambassador asked? "I do not trust anyone, Mr. Ambassador" Aoun replied, adding that Sleiman would not be the one introducing resolutions to the cabinet and that Aoun needed promises from the majority to deal with key issues before presidential elections could be held. Aoun added (with a straight face) that he was attempting to protect Sleiman, because if Sleiman ever disagreed with the majority on any key political issue, the majority would turn on Sleiman and attack him.

I'M NOT AN ALLY OF HIZBALLAH

¶10. (C) Aoun said the March 14 majority needed to make a separation, psychologically, between his Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) party and Hizballah, with whom the FPM signed a memorandum of understanding in 2006. March 14 confuses FPM with being an ally of Hizballah, he added. According to Aoun, "The majority will always be afraid of us if they do not make this distinction, which will ultimately push us closer to Hizballah." He said the two organizations did not always agree on everything, but had a mutual understanding.

¶11. (C) The Ambassador asked Aoun his thoughts on the January 2 speech by Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah. Aoun believed Nasrallah directed his speech more towards March 14 MP and

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Druse leader Walid Jumblatt and Parliament Majority Leader Saad Hariri, and less towards the USG. Aoun said he did not believe Nasrallah's accusations that the U.S. was planning to build military bases in Lebanon, adding that such a plan would be "unfeasible." On the issue of "tawteen" (an Arabic phrase referring to the permanent settlement of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon), Aoun said he understood how some people could believe Nasrallah's accusation that the U.S. supports "tawteen" in Lebanon, because in his view, "The Palestinians can not return to their previous homes in Israel, and no other Arab or non-Arab country is offering to resettle them." Therefore, in Aoun's view "tawteen" was a real fear of Lebanese citizens.

FRENCH WRONG ABOUT SYRIA

¶12. (C) Aoun said France made a mistake dealing with Syria. Aoun said France's mistake was its belief that Syria controlled everything in Lebanon. He added, "Syria and Iran hold no influence over me."

COMMENT

¶13. (C) Aoun's arguments were weak, but he demonstrated no flexibility on moving toward electing Michel Sleiman as president. By adding relatively minor issues (such as the Lebanese in Israel) to the list of what needs to be resolved before presidential elections can take place, Aoun simply

confirms his own ambitions: if he can't be president, then
he is going to work as hard as he can to see that no one else
can, either.

FELTMAN